



4woman.gov

800-994-WOMAN (9662)

888-220-5446 (TDD)

The National Women's Health Information Center

A project of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health



Frequently Asked Questions about Mammograms

What is a mammogram?

A mammogram is a test that is done to look for any abnormalities, or problems, with a woman's breasts. The test uses a special x-ray machine to take pictures of both breasts. The results are recorded on film that your health care provider can examine.

Mammograms look for breast lumps and changes in breast tissue that may develop into problems over time. They can find small lumps or growths that a health care provider or woman can't feel when doing a physical breast exam. Breast lumps or growths can be *benign* (not cancer) or *malignant* (cancer). If a lump is found, a health care provider will order a *biopsy*, a test where a small amount of tissue is taken from the lump and area around the lump. The tissue is sent to a lab to look for cancer or changes that may mean cancer is likely to develop. Finding breast cancer early means that a woman has a better chance of surviving the disease. There are also more choices for treatment when breast cancer is found early.

Are there different types of mammograms?

There are two reasons mammograms are taken. *Screening mammograms* are done for women who have no symptoms of breast cancer. *Diagnostic mammograms* are done when a woman has symptoms of breast cancer or a breast lump. Diagnostic mammograms take longer than screening mammograms because more pictures of the breast are taken.

In January 2000, the FDA approved a new way of doing mammograms, called *digital mammography*. This technique records x-ray images on a computer, rather than film. It can reduce exposure to radiation, allow the person taking the x-ray to make adjustments without having to take another mammogram, and takes pictures of the entire breast even if the denseness of the breast tissue varies.

Are mammograms safe?

A mammogram is a safe, low-dose x-ray of the breast. A high-quality mammogram, along with clinical breast exam (exam done by a professional health care provider) are the most effective tools for detecting breast cancer early.

How is a mammogram done?

You stand in front of a special x-ray machine. The person who takes the x-rays (always a woman) places your breasts (one at a time) between two plastic plates. The plates press your breast and make it flat. You will feel pressure on your breast for a few seconds. It may cause you some discomfort, feeling like squeezing or pinching. But, the flatter your breasts, the better the picture. Most often, two pictures are taken of each breast - one from the side and one from above. The whole thing takes only a few minutes.

How is a mammogram done in a woman with breast implants?

If you have breast implants, be sure to tell your mammography facility that you have them. You will need an x-ray technician who is trained in x-raying patients with implants. This is important because breast implants can hide some breast tissue, which could make it difficult for the radiologist to see breast cancer when looking at your mammograms. For this reason, to take a mammogram of a breast with an implant, the x-ray technician might gently lift the breast tissue slightly away from the implant.

How often should I get a mammogram?

Women over 40 should get a mammogram every 1 to 2 years. This guideline was just re-issued by the federal government's U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. And, it is also the position of the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Women who have had breast cancer or breast problems, or with a family history of breast cancer may need to start having mammograms at a younger age or more often. Talk to your health care provider about how often you should get a mammogram. Be aware that mammograms don't take the place of getting breast exams from a health care provider and examining your own breasts.

If you find a lump or see changes in your breast, talk to your health care provider right away no matter what your age. Your health care provider may order a mammogram for you to get a better look at your breast changes.

Where can I get a mammogram?

Be sure to get a mammogram from a facility certified by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). These places must meet high standards for their x-ray machines and staff. Check out the FDA's web site on the Internet at: <http://www.fda.gov/cdrh/mammography/certified.html> for a list of FDA-certified mammography facilities. Some of these facilities also offer digital mammograms.

Your health care provider, local medical clinic, or local or state health department can tell you where to get no-cost or low-cost mammograms. Also, call the National Cancer Institute's toll free number 1-800-422-6237 for information on no-cost or low-cost mammograms.

How can I get ready for my mammogram?

First, check with the place you are having the mammogram for any special things you may need to do before you go. Here are some general guidelines to follow:

- Make your mammogram appointment for one week after your period. Your breasts hurt less after your period.
- Wear a shirt with shorts, pants, or a skirt. That way you can undress from the waist up and leave your shorts, pants, or skirt on when you get your mammogram.
- Don't wear any deodorant, perfume, lotion, or powder under your arms or on your breasts on the day of your mammogram appointment. These things can make shadows show up on your mammogram.

Are there any problems with mammograms?

As with any medical test, mammograms can have limits. These limits include:

- Mammograms are only part of a complete breast exam. If they show abnormalities your health care provider will follow-up with other tests.
- False negatives can happen. This means everything may look normal, but cancer is actually present. False negatives don't happen often. Younger women are more likely to have a false negative mammogram than are older women. This is because the breast tissue is denser, making cancer harder to spot.
- False positives can happen. This is when the mammogram results look like cancer is present, even though it is not. False positives are more common in younger women than older women.

This FAQ was adapted from mammography fact sheets from the National Cancer Institute.

For more information...

For more information on mammograms, contact the National Women's Health Information Center (800-994-9662) or the following organizations:

Cancer Information Service, NCI, NIH, HHS

Phone: (800) 422-6237

Internet Address: <http://cis.nci.nih.gov/>

American Cancer Society

Phone: (800) 227-2345 (24 hours)

Internet Address: <http://www.cancer.org/>

Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation

Phone: (800) 462-9273

Internet Address: <http://www.komen.org/>

National Breast Cancer Coalition

Phone: (202) 296-7477

Internet Address: <http://www.natlbcc.org/>

National "Get A Mammogram: Do It For Yourself, Do It For Your Family" Campaign

(brochures in English, Chinese, Tagalog, and Vietnamese)

National Cancer Institute (NCI)

Phone Number(s): (800) 4-CANCER (800-422-6237)

Internet Address: <http://breasthealth.cancer.gov>

All material contained in the FAQs is free of copyright restrictions, and may be copied, reproduced, or duplicated without permission of the Office on Women's Health in the Department of Health and Human Services; citation of the sources is appreciated.

March 2002